

Distracted Drivers: A Dangerous

Photos courtesy of AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety and Kristin Oguntinyinbo, UNC Highway Safety Research Center

Each year, an estimated 284,000 distracted drivers are involved in serious crashes, according to a study by the University of North Carolina (UNC) Highway Safety Research Center. This study was funded by the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety.

“We found that 15 percent of the drivers in the study were not paying attention, and just over half of these (8.3 percent) were distracted by something inside or outside the vehicle,” said Dr. Jane Stutts, manager of epidemiological studies at the UNC center and author of the study. When drivers with unknown-attention status were removed from the data, the percentage of distracted drivers rose to 12.9 percent.

What distracts drivers?

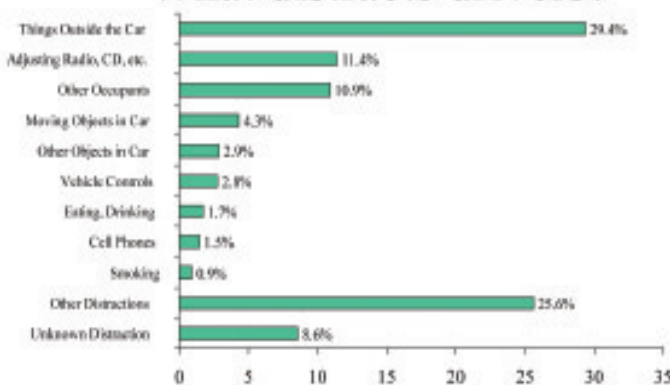


Chart courtesy of UNC Highway Safety Research Center

The study found that drivers most often were distracted by something outside their vehicles, followed by adjusting a radio or CD player. Other distractions included talking with passengers, adjusting vehicle or climate controls, eating or drinking, using a cell phone, and smoking.

“Different age groups appeared to be distracted by different things,” Dr. Stutts said. Drivers under 20 were especially likely to be distracted by tuning the radio or changing CDs, while young adults (ages 20 to 29) seemed to be more distracted by passengers. Drivers over 65 were more distracted by objects or events happening outside the vehicle. Most of the distracted drivers were male (63 percent), partly because, as a group, males drive more than females and are more likely to be involved in serious crashes.

[Researchers used the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration’s crashworthiness data system for the study. This system examines a sample of about 5,000 crashes a year, in which at least one vehicle was damaged enough to require towing. Federal investigators collect detailed information about each crash. They examine the vehicle and crash scene, then

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interview drivers and witnesses. The UNC center's study used data from 1995 through 1999 and included 32,303 vehicles.—Ed.]

Here's a look at the most common driving distractions and some tips on how you can avoid falling victim to them.



Can't imagine life without your cell phone? They're an important part of everyday life, but using them while driving increases your chance of getting into an accident by 400 percent.

When you're searching for a number, dialing or talking on a cell phone, you're not watching the road like you should. Hands-free features help, but they can't prevent you from becoming involved in a conversation and losing concentration.

A survey of 837 drivers with cell phones found that almost half swerved or drifted into another lane, 23 percent tailgated, 21 percent cut off someone, and 18 percent nearly hit another vehicle while using the phone. So what can you do? How can you be a safe driver if you absolutely have to use your phone while traveling? Wireless-phone manufacturers suggest these options:

- Pull off the road and stop in a safe place before using your phone. *[Keep this in mind: If you're on a busy road and want to make a call, it's not always safe just to pull over to the side. Records show that people doing this have been killed when other motorists hit them from behind. Experts say the best thing to do is to get away from all traffic by pulling into a parking lot and then making your call. Also remember it's illegal to use a cell phone in your vehicle in some states. Check your local state and municipal laws to avoid problems.—Ed.]*

- When the phone rings in traffic, let it ring. It's better to use your phone's voice mail or even to miss a call than to put yourself, your passengers, or others at risk.

- Become familiar with your phone before using it on the road.

- Never take notes or jot down numbers while driving.



From breakfast burritos to burgers and fries, eating on the run has turned into an everyday part of our lives. Haven't you tried holding french fries on your lap, a drink in one hand, and a sandwich in the other while your knees do the steering?

Eating while driving is messy, and it's dangerous. Fumbling with napkins, condiments, wrappers, and beverages means you're not watching the road. Here are two ways you can concentrate more on the road than on your burger:

- Leave a little early. Allow time to stop for a bite to eat.

- If you're traveling with someone, take turns driving and eating.



Whether it's adjusting a radio station, changing CDs, moving the air-conditioning or heater switches, or setting the cruise control—they all help make travel more comfortable and fun. You probably think of these actions as routine. After all, you've been doing them since you got your license. How big is the risk? You're six times more likely to have an accident while searching for a radio station or inserting a CD than you are while glancing at the fuel gauge or speedometer.

Let's say you're going 60 mph when you look down for just two seconds to choose a CD or adjust the climate controls. In those two seconds, you'll travel—blindly—180 feet, or more than half the length of a football field. Try these tips to keep your attention on the road:

- Ask your passenger to adjust the radio or climate controls for you.

- Take advantage of normal stops to adjust controls.

- With more complex devices, such as GPS-navigation systems, take time to stop in a safe place before giving them your attention.

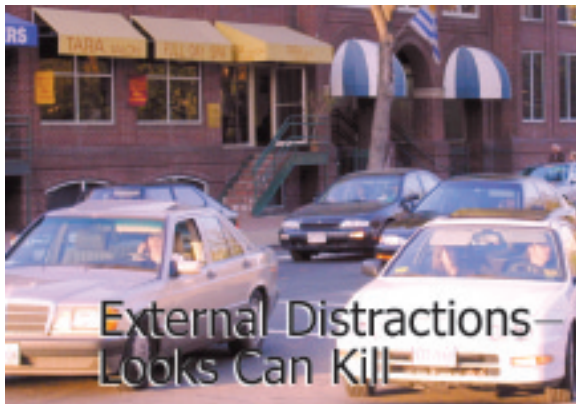


It's hard enough concentrating on the road without the distraction of children, pets and passengers. Adding just one of these factors can making driving dangerous, but there are ways to control these hazards:

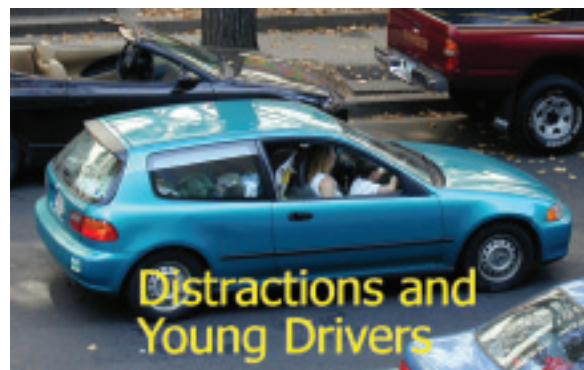
- Buckle up the children, and give them books, games or other items to occupy their time.
- Use a pet carrier or portable kennel to limit a pet's ability to roam.
- Avoid arguments with passengers, and minimize distracting conversations while driving.



How many times have you seen people putting on makeup, styling their hair, or shaving while driving? How about people reading maps or directions, a newspaper, or a book? And we all know smoking is hazardous enough, without lighting up or putting out cigarettes or dealing with falling ashes while you're driving. The only safe solution is never do any of these things.



The urge to get a good look at the scene of an accident or at cars that have been stopped by police is nearly overwhelming. And who can resist a long look at the stores going into a new shopping center? The best advice: Don't do it! Those things never are more important than staying focused on your driving. Letting your concentration be diverted by these distractions can be deadly.



Car crashes are the No. 1 killer of teenagers in America. More than 5,000 die each year. Among the reasons are inexperience, risk-taking, and driver distractions, including loud music, changing CDs or tapes, and tuning the radio. And when a teen driver has friends in the car, the risk is even higher—the more passengers, the greater the chance of a serious crash.

Here are other common—and deadly—distractions among teenagers:

- **Friends in other vehicles.** Don't let saying "hi" or other fun and games take your attention off the road. Never try to pass items from one moving vehicle to another.
- **Headphones.** Hearing what's going on around you is just as important as seeing. In most states, it's illegal to wear headphones while driving.
- **The "show off" factor.** It may be tempting to go faster, turn sharper, or beat another car through an intersection, but don't

[In the United States, 16-year-olds have three times the crash risk of older teenagers and almost 10 times the crash risk of drivers ages 30 to 59. Accordingly, many states have varying components of a graduated-licensing program. The most common components of this program are nighttime-driving restrictions, provisional licensing with accelerated penalties, and driver-improvement programs. Some states require young drivers to hold a learner's permit for a minimum length of time, and they impose stringent requirements on the accompanying driver, such as having a specified number of years' driving experience.—Ed.]

do it. Stay focused on driving safely and staying alive. ■

Information for this article came from the Shell Oil Company (its "Distracted Driving" booklet), the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety, and the UNC Highway Safety Research Center, with assistance from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, the Federal Highway Administration, and the National Safety Council. If you want to reproduce this story in any format, you first must obtain permission of all parties named above.—Ed.

30 MPH and 30 Feet to Stop

By Lt. Gerald Burghardt,
VT-7

Great weather year-round, wide-open highways, and beautiful scenery—perfect conditions for riding motorcycles, and you find it all in California. A couple squadromates and I decided to explore more of this area one gorgeous, autumn weekend.

I was the lead of three motorcycles. We had been riding for about two hours when we stopped for dinner. Afterward, we climbed

back on our bikes, made a right turn out of the restaurant, and rapidly accelerated. This exhilarating experience was short-lived, however, thanks to a red light ahead.

Because we were traveling a state route, the street was wide enough for a car to make a right turn at the light, so we started passing stopped cars on the right side. This movement put us in a position to make our right turn. At the intersection was a restaurant, and we